A Finer Grained Assessment Approach for Literacy Learners

Background

The introduction of the Tasmanian state government’s Tasmanian Adult Literacy Action Plan 2010-15 (Action Plan) energised the adult language, literacy and numeracy field in Tasmania in the wake of the 2006 Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALLS) statistics which showed Tasmania as the state with the lowest rates of adult literacy and numeracy. The Action Plan provided for 23 literacy coordinators, placed in LINC Tasmania and Corrections sites throughout the state, as well as grant opportunities for demand-driven, locally tailored literacy projects. A campaign to raise awareness about the extent of adult literacy skills, provide plain English workshops, and a strategy to coordinate a concerted response involving business, community and government coalesced into the 26 TEN: Get the Tools for Life brand.

Measuring Progress – the Theory

The Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) was chosen as the tool to measure improvements in a learner’s language, literacy, learning or numeracy skills. The chosen measure of progress was a movement from one core skill level to the next in one core skill. For example, a learner is assessed by a Literacy Coordinator at Level 1 in the writing core skill on entry into LINC’s one-to-one literacy volunteer tutor program. Nine months later, the learner is assessed again, and found to be performing at Level 2 in the writing core skill. From the perspective of the learner, the learning supporter, and the Action Plan funder, this counts as a successful outcome.

Measuring Progress – how it turned out / in Practice

Reports from the Action Plan’s first years showed that using the measure of a movement of a whole level in one or more core skills within a reporting period meant that much of the Action Plan’s progress and success was invisible. A consequence of the bar of success being set at this height was a growing sense amongst the Action Plan’s stakeholders that something was not performing to expectations. A decision was taken in 2011 to slide the bar down to the level of core skills indicators. Reportable progress became a rise in a level of one of the eleven indicators during a reporting period or the course of a community or work-based project. One consequence was that learner progress and success became more visible to the funder, program managers, adult literacy support officers and tutors. This decision moved the measure of progress from the coarse-grained core skill level to the finer-grained indicator level. This is the scale used for the federal Skills for Education and Employment (SEE) Program. The Program Guidelines outline the expectation that learners progress one level in one indicator per 100 hours of instruction (approximately) with up to a total of 800 hours each time a learner joins the Program.

The magnitude of the Action Plan’s strategies for delivering literacy support is significantly smaller than the SEE program. Both community and workplace based initiatives can begin at as little as five learner contact hours. In the workplace, business pressures have a significant impact on project design, and in the community key characteristics of target learners and how they engage this support can constrain the number of hours available for delivery. For example, LINC’s largely one-to-one volunteer tutor-based program brings Tasmanian adults from across the state’s regions into supportive relationships for weekly tutorials that can run from 1 to 2 hours. This amount of time provides the first steps, for many, back into learning engagement, but what progress is made is difficult to capture using the measurement unit of an indicator level, even over a year.

The literacy support offered through the Action Plan’s grant programs provide real opportunities for learning engagement, but the length of many of these courses and programs, from 1 day in some cases to 1 day a week for 6 weeks in others, alongside the difficulties of performing comprehensive diagnostic assessments, make these measures of success unable to be drawn and reported.

The Action Plan targets adult Tasmanians at ACSF Level 3 and below. Based on the reported assessments of learners in LINC Tasmania’s program, learners seeking Plan-based support overwhelmingly have core skills at Pre-Level 1 and Level 1 in at least one indicator. These starting levels provide significant barriers to the speed of progress, as learners in this cohort often present with multiple social, psychological, and economic problems, and often have had negative experiences with the formal education system. Due to these barriers, the nature of learner engagement can be intermittent and characterised by a series of short-term engagements. Taken together, these factors of program and learner characteristics make the choice of using an increase in ACSF indicator levels too coarse a measure to make much of the learner progress and success visible and reportable.

The LINC Volunteer Tutor Service and the Grants Programs have been underway since 2010. In this time, through formal and anecdotal reporting we have seen evidence that people’s lives have been improved and business’s profitability has increased despite a smaller than anticipated number of learners improving one level in one indicator of a core skill.

Faced with this fundamental dissonance Skills Tasmania commissioned research to see if the ACSF could be used to assess smaller improvements than the indicator level: that is a in a finer grained way.

The Research Project

Escalier McLean Consulting’s Philippa McLean, with Katrina Lyle, used their deep knowledge of LLN provision and particularly Philippa’s intimate understanding of the ACSF, combined with the experiences of Tasmanian practitioners, to produce a report that makes three recommendations (2013). Central to the recommendations is an analysis of each of the 6 finer grained options of the ACSF, weighing up how effectively each could be used to measure literacy progress (Table 1). These options are:

* Indicators
* Focus Areas
* Performance Features
* Level of Support
* Domains of Communication
* Text Types

The report’s recommendations, which have either been carried out or are underway, were to:

1. Convene a discussion group to consider the options in Table 1

2. Trial some or all of the options in Table 1. Trialling will indicate which of the

options might work and whether this approach will meet the requirements of

Skills Tasmania.

3. Situate the report and the trial in the national arena by seeking the support of

DIICCSRTE [sic] who have responsibility for the ACSF. Broadening the research

and trialling of possible options to other states and territories will strengthen

the veracity of findings from further exploration of this issue.

The Pilot Projects

In March 2014 trialling of options, not including indicators, began after 18 literacy practitioners met in Campbell Town, in the middle of Tasmania, for a day long workshop to explore this stage’s possibilities. One notable outcome from the workshop was that some practitioners were keen to mix options, seeking to balance the specific needs of learners in their programs with the funder’s requirements of valid and reliable assessment measures. Seeking this balance will remain one of the main challenges of this trial.

While the range of trial projects is large, some common themes have emerged. Most projects are mixing finer grained options, often starting with one or two focus areas. From these focus areas, key performance features that target the specific skill gaps learners are seeking to fill are chosen, and cross-checked against movement in level of support. Workplace-based programs that are targetting specific skill development, such as improving report writing, are using the ACSF to disaggregate the elements of this text type and then map the lines of progress that increasing independence in performing, and mastery of, these elements travel along. Community-based programs, where learner-directed goals can range across the ACSF, are also honing in on focus areas, but allowing the learner’s needs to guide which ones are brought into play and how these are cross-checked against other finer grained options, such as communication domains. For example, a learner with Level 2 oral communication skills in the personal and community domain of communication could be supported to successfully perform sample activities in the education and training domain as a finer grained outcome.

Uses of Assessment / The Future ?

As mentioned above, the challenge here, especially in the more learner-directed programs, lies in balancing different assessment and reporting purposes.

Indeed, as Rosemary Hipkins citing Aikenhead (2010) argues, assessment can be seen to have three purposes, with each purpose aligned in an assemblage with particular criteria, methods and actors:

* Systems accountability and reporting—reliable and summative—program funder
* Improving teaching and learning—valid, diagnostic and formative—teacher
* Lifelong learning—student ‘owned’ and formative—learner

The challenge of balancing these three assemblages may well be supported by using the ACSF in finer grained ways. On the other hand, a risk in the project is that finer grained could mean more detailed and thereby less manageable assessments (Hipkins, 2010). In contexts where practitioners work to established assessment targets and methods, such as occurs in the SEE Program, exploring finer grained uses of the ACSF might seem a marginal use of squeezed time better spent preparing, teaching and assessing. While use of finer grained methods might be easier to fit to community-based and targeted, workplace-based literacy support, exploration and trials in other contexts would support the goal of seeking to balance these three assessment assemblages that can often oscillate arrhythmically in programs where one assessment assemblage outweighs the other two.

What’s next

The trialling of projects in Tasmania will continue throughout 2014, with a final report drawing conclusions and making recommendations due in early 2015. The authors invite practitioners and others working in the LLN field to join this exploration either by considering trialling projects in your region or state, or by contributing to and continuing the dialogue that has recently raised its volume in Tasmania.

References

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Authors

Michael Christie is Literacy Coordinator at Bridgewater LINC for LINC Tasmania. He has worked in the university and adult community learning sector since 2004. In 2009, Michael completed a doctorate in the narratology of Australian Grunge fiction and Australian Labourism’s neoliberalising, and has research interests in further developing narrative methods to support and provide accounts of adult learning.

Jennifer Dunbabin is Senior Project and Policy Officer - Adult Literacy at Skills Tasmania. She has worked in the VET sector since 1999, specialising in workforce development, e-learning and most recently adult literacy. She manages the 26TEN Grants program which funds LLN projects in the community and workplace.